



What You Want Visitors to Know, Feel, or Do: Five Outcome Types for Historic Sites and House Museums

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Historic sites and house museums often begin planning interpretation by asking what stories they want to tell, what objects they want to display, or what activities they want visitors to experience. Those are important questions, but they do not define success. It's better to start at the end: ***What do we want visitors to know, feel, or do as a result of this experience?***

Clear outcomes help turn interpretation from a collection of content and activities into an **intentional visitor experience**. They focus attention on the changes a museum hopes to encourage in visitors' knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. Outcomes can range from relatively modest goals, such as identifying a significant person or recognizing the function of a room, to more ambitious ones, such as reconsidering a familiar historical narrative, feeling connected to a community's history, or taking action after a visit.

When outcomes are missing or weak, interpretation can easily become unfocused and confusing. Staff may add facts simply because they are interesting, develop interactives because they seem engaging, or select objects because they are available rather than because they advance a larger purpose. Visitors may encounter many individual elements without seeing how they fit together or why they matter. Weak outcomes also make evaluation difficult. If a goal is merely for visitors to "learn about" a topic or "appreciate" a historic place, it is difficult to determine what success would look like.

Strong outcomes provide a practical decision-making tool. They help staff determine which stories deserve emphasis, which evidence is necessary, which interpretive methods are appropriate, and which ideas can be omitted. They also create a foundation for evaluation because they describe changes that can be observed, discussed, or investigated. Most importantly, they encourage interpreters to think beyond the transfer of information. Effective interpretation may help visitors make connections, develop curiosity, reconsider assumptions, continue a conversation, support preservation, or participate in civic life.

The five Outcome Types in this framework—**Orientation, Recognition, Connection, Perspective, and Response**—describe different ways visitors might engage with history, from becoming grounded in a place to carrying meaning beyond the visit. They are presented in a common sequence of engagement, but they are not steps or levels. The accompanying verbs are intended as prompts, not as a checklist. Select verbs that best express the change you hope to encourage, then specify what visitors will know, feel, or do. Not every tour, program, or exhibition needs outcomes of every type, and the verbs do not need to be distributed evenly among cognition, emotion, and behavior. Three to five outcomes are usually sufficient.

Some verbs appear in more than one type because the same action can serve

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different purposes depending on the context of the outcome. For example, visitors might **compare** two objects for Recognition to notice differences or **compare** conflicting stories for Perspective to examine how interpretation changes with viewpoint. The outcome type is determined not by the verb alone, but by what visitors are being asked to do with it.

As you write outcomes, be cautious with a small vocabulary of commonly used but imprecise words: **understand, learn, know, appreciate, become aware of, and realize**. These terms often conceal what you want visitors to achieve. When one appears, ask: ***What would visitors think, feel, say, or do that would convince us this outcome was achieved?*** Replace the vague term with a more specific verb—such as identify, explain, connect, question, value, empathize, discuss, or act.

The purpose of this list is not to make outcomes sound more academic. It is to make them more useful: clear enough to guide interpretation, specific enough to evaluate, and meaningful enough to improve the visitor experience.

Outcome Types At-A-Glance

Use the five Outcome Types to identify the **kind of change** you want **visitors** to experience. This requires a mental shift from defining success based on the museum's accomplishments (e.g., exhibitions, programs, publications) to changes in what visitors know, feel, or do.

Outcome Type	Visitors will...	Emphasis
Orientation	Become grounded in the place, topic, time period, purpose, and experience.	<i>Where am I? What is this about?</i>
Recognition	Identify significant people, places, events, objects, evidence, themes, or questions.	<i>What am I noticing or learning?</i>
Connection	Link evidence across time, place, themes, and personal or contemporary experience.	<i>How does this relate to something else?</i>
Perspective	Consider how different people experienced, interpreted, or remembered the past.	<i>How might this look different from another point of view?</i>
Response	Carry meaning beyond the experience through reflection, discussion, exploration, support, stewardship, or action.	<i>What might I think, feel, or do as a result?</i>

The types are presented in a common sequence of visitor engagement, but they are not a ladder, hierarchy, or set of steps that every visitor must complete. One type is not inherently more important or advanced than another. Select the types that best fit the audience, subject, setting, and time available. An effective experience may emphasize only two or three types, while a more extensive exhibition or program may address all five.



Orientation

Visitors become grounded in the place, topic, purpose, time period, format, and methods. These verbs should establish a sense of direction rather than expect significant historical understanding.

- a. **Locate (know/do):** Place a site, person, object, event, or activity geographically, spatially, or chronologically.
- b. **Identify (know):** Recognize and name the place, topic, time period, purpose, or type of experience.
- c. **Describe (know):** State basic characteristics of a place, period, topic, or interpretive experience.
- d. **Situate (know):** Place a subject within a basic geographic, chronological, cultural, or historical context.
- e. **Sequence (know/do):** Arrange major periods, events, or developments in chronological order.
- f. **Distinguish (know):** Differentiate major periods, spaces, functions, people, or interpretive approaches.
- g. **Navigate (do):** Find one's way through the site and use its spaces, activities, or interpretive resources.
- h. **Anticipate (know/feel):** Develop expectations about what the experience will explore or ask visitors to consider.
- i. **Recognize (know):** Understand the basic identity, significance, or purpose of the site or experience.
- j. **Feel oriented (feel):** Experience a sense of comfort, readiness, or confidence about where one is, what is happening, and how to participate.

Recognition

Visitors identify key people, places, events, objects, sources, themes, or historical questions. This is where visitors begin noticing and working with the actual evidence and subjects of history.

- a. **Identify (know):** Recognize and name significant people, places, events, objects, sources, themes, or questions.
- b. **Notice (know/do):** Pay attention to significant details, patterns, differences, absences, or evidence.
- c. **Observe (do):** Look closely at an object, document, building, landscape, image, or other source.
- d. **Describe (know):** Articulate significant characteristics or details of historical evidence.
- e. **Recognize (know):** Connect something encountered with a significant person, event, place, period, subject, or idea.
- f. **Classify (know/do):** Group objects, people, events, places, or sources according to meaningful characteristics.
- g. **Distinguish (know):** Differentiate people, periods, events, places, sources, or interpretations.
- h. **Examine (do):** Investigate historical evidence closely to discover what it may reveal.
- i. **Question (know/do):** Identify something about the evidence, story, or interpretation that merits further inquiry.
- j. **Become curious (feel):** Develop interest in learning more about a person, place, object, event, topic, or historical question.



Connection

Visitors link evidence in the site's history across time and place, including the present and their own lives. They describe relationships such as cause and effect, continuity and change, influence and consequence. This category contains many of the workhorse verbs of historical reasoning.

- a. **Connect (know):** Link people, places, objects, events, ideas, experiences, or periods in meaningful ways.
- b. **Compare (know/do):** Identify significant similarities among historical evidence, experiences, places, or contexts.
- c. **Contrast (know/do):** Identify significant differences among historical evidence, experiences, places, or contexts.
- d. **Relate (know/feel):** Connect historical material to broader themes, other places, personal experience, or contemporary life.
- e. **Trace (know/do):** Follow a development, relationship, idea, cause, or change through time or place.
- f. **Explain (know):** Give a reason for relationships, causes, consequences, continuities, changes, or historical developments.
- g. **Contextualize (know):** Place evidence, people, actions, or events within their larger historical circumstances.
- h. **Interpret (know/do):** Select evidence and context to develop meaning or explain significance.
- i. **Find relevance (feel):** Recognize why a historical person, place, story, issue, or experience matters personally or publicly.
1. **Feel connected (feel):** Experience a sense of relationship to a person, community, place, story, or issue encountered through the interpretation.

Perspective

Visitors consider how different people interpreted, experienced, and remembered the same events, places, and objects, and recognize how interpretation is shaped by viewpoint, context, sources, and questions. This is where the framework introduces historiography, perspective, evidence, and uncertainty.

- a. **Consider (know/do):** Give thoughtful attention to another viewpoint, experience, interpretation, or possibility.
- b. **Compare (know/do):** Examine similarities and differences among perspectives, experiences, sources, or interpretations.
- c. **Analyze (know):** Examine evidence, assumptions, relationships, viewpoints, or interpretations closely.
- d. **Evaluate (know):** Assess the strength, limitations, credibility, or usefulness of evidence or interpretation.
- e. **Question (know/do):** Challenge assumptions, omissions, interpretations, apparent certainties, or one's own understanding.
- f. **Acknowledge (know/feel):** Recognize uncertainty, complexity, conflicting evidence, or legitimate differences in perspective.
- g. **Reconsider (know):** Reexamine a previous assumption, belief, or interpretation in light of new evidence or perspectives.
- h. **Reframe (know):** Understand a person, event, place, issue, or story through a different interpretive lens.
- i. **Empathize (feel):** Seek to understand another person's experience, circumstances, emotions, or point of view without assuming complete identification with them.



- j. **Respect (feel):** Regard perspectives or experiences different from one's own as worthy of serious consideration.

Response

Visitors carry meaning beyond the visit through reflection, sharing, support, stewardship, advocacy, or civic action. Outcomes of this type may encourage specific forms of response, such as supporting preservation or becoming more involved in community life, but should not prescribe what visitors must feel, believe, or do. Instead, the house museum or historic site creates opportunities and clear pathways for visitors to decide what matters to them and how, if at all, they want to respond—whether by reflecting, continuing a conversation, learning more, supporting preservation, or taking civic action.

- a. **Reflect (know/feel):** Consider what the experience means personally, historically, or publicly.
- b. **Discuss (do):** Exchange ideas, questions, interpretations, or reactions with others.
- c. **Share (do):** Communicate knowledge, stories, perspectives, experiences, or resources with others.
- d. **Explore (do):** Pursue additional information, sources, places, experiences, or questions.
- e. **Value (feel):** Regard a person, place, story, resource, perspective, or issue as meaningful or worthy of attention.
- f. **Care (feel):** Develop concern for a person, community, place, issue, cultural resource, or historical legacy.
- g. **Support (feel/do):** Contribute attention, time, resources, endorsement, or assistance to something considered worthwhile.
- h. **Participate (do):** Become involved in a related activity, conversation, organization, community, or civic process.
- i. **Steward (feel/do):** Help care for, sustain, document, preserve, or interpret historical and cultural resources.
- j. **Act (do):** Take an intentional step informed or inspired by the interpretive experience.

How Much Change Can You Expect?

Choosing an Outcome Type identifies the **kind of change** you want visitors to experience—whether that involves orientation, recognition, connection, perspective, or response. The next question is **how ambitious that change should be**. Not every desired change is equally realistic for every visitor or every interpretive experience.

Ambition Levels describe how much change you reasonably hope an interpretive experience will produce. Some outcomes should be **achievable** for most visitors, while others may be **challenging** or **aspirational**, depending on the audience, subject, setting, and amount of time available.

The verb alone does not determine the ambition of an outcome. The **same verb can support outcomes with very different levels of difficulty**, depending on what visitors are being asked to identify, explain, reconsider, examine, or do. For example, identifying the purpose of a room may be readily achievable, while identifying how that room reflects changing social relationships may be more



challenging. An aspirational outcome might ask visitors to reconsider a long-held assumption, pursue additional research, or take action after the visit.

Thinking in terms of ambition helps museums **avoid two common problems:** setting goals so modest that they produce little meaningful change or setting goals so ambitious that they are unrealistic for an hour-long tour. Strong visitor experiences usually include a mix of Ambition Levels, with several outcomes that are reasonably attainable and a smaller number that stretch visitors toward deeper reflection, connection, or response. **Aspirational outcomes are not inherently better; the goal is to choose an appropriate level of ambition for the audience and experience.**